

PRESIDENTIAL AND PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF GHANA IN DECEMBER 2008

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On December 7, 2008, Ghana elected a new parliament as well as a new president. Having obtained no more than 107 seats in parliament, the hitherto ruling National Patriotic Party (NPP) lost not only the absolute but also the simple majority. The 114 seats won by the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) gave it almost a majority, while the People's National Convention (PNC) won two and the Convention People's Party (CPP) one seat. Four unaffiliated parliamentarians might rise to some eminence as procurers of majorities.

As none of the eight presidential contenders won the requisite majority of votes the first time around, runoff elections were held on December 28, and early in January 2009 it was established that the NDC's candidate, John Atta Mills, would be the next president. However, as his own party does not have a majority he will have to rely on the votes of the minor parties.

The NPP, which had been running its campaign in a somewhat lackadaisical manner, was obviously surprised by the outcome of the elections which are of considerable importance for the development of democracy in the entire region. Again and again, people were heard to say, 'The world is watching us!' And indeed, the press both inside and outside Africa had been observing the polls attentively. After all, the democratic movement all over Africa appeared in an increasingly dubious light: One year before the poll in Ghana, a would-be president had rigged elections in Nigeria to seize power. In Kenya, violence reigned after the elections late in 2007. In Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe proved once again that he is unwilling to relinquish his hold on power. And in Guinea, the military staged a putsch after the death of president Conté. Therefore, the big question that arose was: What will happen after the elections in Ghana?

From the time when it obtained independence as the first black African colony in 1957, the history of Ghana was turbulent, studded with military putsches and phases of authoritarian rule such as that of the air force lieutenant, Jerry J. Rawlings, which lasted until 1992. Democratically elected in the period that followed, Rawlings continued as president until 2000, when he was replaced by John Agyekum Kufuor, who was confirmed in office in 2004. Thus, the situation that prevailed before the elections of 2008 was intriguing in itself: there was a standoff between two blocks which, having ruled for eight years each, were ideologically incompatible and supported by people belonging to different regions and ethnic camps. While the NPP has its main strongholds in the Ashanti region, in Brong-Ahafo and the eastern re-

gion, the NDC supporters come from the Volta region and three other regions in the north of the country where the economy is traditionally weak.

The situation appeared politically explosive, all the more so as both parties were firmly convinced of their own superiority and the incompetence of the other party. To defuse tension, an inter-party advisory committee was set up which developed an – albeit non-binding – code of conduct. However, occasional riots in the Volta region gave rise to the fear that its effect might be limited.

Moreover, there was some concern not only about the situation before the elections but also about the time afterwards. Who would be the winner, with access to the revenues from the recent economic boom? Who would be managing the oil deposits recently discovered off the coast of Ghana, where extraction is scheduled to begin in 2010? Yet another source of conflict is the anti-corruption proceedings against former NDC ministers, which Mr Kufuor himself instituted years ago to set a signal.

There is need to reform both the constitution and the administration: the president's far-reaching power to override parliamentary majorities constitutes an imbalance in the political system. The executive branch is more influential than the other two branches, especially the legislature. The bogged-down process of decentralization needs fresh impulses. Yet decentralization alone cannot induce active participation by the population at the local level. Regional authorities must be given the power to make their own political decisions. Moreover, the relationship between traditional rule and the modern political and judicial system needs to be re-defined as well.

Bodies of importance for the elections include the Electoral Commission (EC) and the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE). The former has built up a good reputation because of its independence – despite various criticisms that were heard in the run-up to the recent elections. Informing and educating voters is the duty of the latter which, however, it can hardly fulfil without international support because of the scarcity of funds.

Following its statutes, the NDC elected its presidential candidate as early as December 2006. After an intense selection process carried out in the eyes of the public, John Atta Mills won the day with more than 80 percent of the vote. By contrast, the NPP nominated its candidate only in December 2007, and it is said that Mr Kufuor himself promoted his preferred candidate among the 17 applicants. Moreover, rumour has it that folding money was distributed among the delegates before the former foreign minister, Nana Akufo-Addo, emerged victorious.

It is this charge of bribery which most clearly shows how torn the NPP is along ethnic dividing lines. Mr Akufo-Addo comes from a rich family that belongs to the Akyem ethnic minority which, like other ethnic minorities, competes with the larger Ashanti group and thought the time had come to raise one of their own side to the office of president. To refute any suspicion that tribalism might influence Ghana's politics, it is argued that the party code itself reflects the constitutional precept according to which political parties should be organized nationwide, and their members and representatives, like their national executive committees, should be composed of people from all districts of the country.

Although both sides ran committed and elaborate campaigns, only the NPP and the NDC proved themselves able to mobilize the country. Numerous players, such as churches and civil-society groups, were active as well, informing the people and emphasizing the importance of peaceful and transparent elections. Compared to that, the dispute about factual subjects took a back seat – small wonder, given the level of political information and education in the country. The campaign before the runoff elections for president was somewhat harsher, although it is worthy of note that the incumbent, Mr Kufuor, appeared anxious to hold himself back and hardly boosted his own party. The same was true for Jerry J. Rawlings who, rather unusually, displayed a matter-of-fact, moderate style.

Once the final results given above were out, president Kufuor was made the goat by his supporters as well as by the press, both claiming that he had not promoted the candidate of his own party with sufficient commitment. The overall impression was that the NPP, riven by internal strife as it was, had underestimated the NDC as a political opponent. Nor did the former ruling party have much to show for itself with respect to substantive matters. While it is true that the numbers of the poor declined, the lot of the absolutely poor – 20 percent of Ghana's population, no less – drastically deteriorated once again, not least because of ballooning food prices. Moreover, the NPP's attempt to upgrade its relations with traditional leaders had backfired. One thing that had aroused general disapproval was that the king of the Ashanti had been presented to foreign visitors as if he were the monarch of all Ghana. Lastly, the government had been unable to rid itself of the stigma of having been involved in the murder of the Adani king and 30 of his followers in 2002.

The coming legislative period will not be all sweetness and light for the incoming president, Mr Mills, particularly because his party does not have a majority. The problems that await their solution are numerous: the country is suffering heavily from the current global financial and economic crisis. In view of the fact that the Kufuor government attempted to cover part of its budget deficit with privatization revenues, the World Bank estimates that

Ghana will have to spend 14 percent of its GDP on servicing its tax deficit debts. For these reasons, it will be indispensable to introduce a circumspect economic and taxation policy that builds up confidence, particularly because other necessary reforms in the country depend on this. Some problems have already been named – reforming the constitution, re-defining the relationship between traditional authorities and a modern constitutional state, resuming the process of decentralization, and strengthening the judicial system as such. However, there are other problems of equal urgency: the option of moving the election date forward so as to facilitate the transfer of authority would have to be investigated. The court of audit needs strengthening. Reforms to create more jobs for trainees and employees are pressing in a country in which every other citizen is below 18 years of age. Redressing the balance between regions by stepping up the promotion of the economy and the infrastructure in the north is another matter of some urgency. The same holds true for developing and consistently implementing a national environmental policy. And finally, remittances from expatriates as well as development cooperation funds should be utilized more efficiently.

Ghana has already won an outstanding international reputation for itself. If the new constellation of forces in the country should employ its dynamism to tackle the challenges named above, this would again highlight the pioneering role played by the country in the progress of all Africa.

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